

Back Again by theowlandtheunicorn

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Summary:

Steve thinks Dustin's pets will be the death of him.

Dustin thinks they'll all be fine, as long as they have Tolkien.

They're both close enough.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Several things:

1. I am slightly terrified of posting this fic for several reasons, and one of them is that I'm not sure if we're allowed to do this in fanfiction (have characters talk about other works so much), especially on ff.net. If someone knows for sure, please tell me!
2. This fic contains spoilers for Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit. Not many and not in great detail, but y'know.
3. It's tagged Trauma for a reason. I'm wary of tagging it as PTSD, but there are definitely descriptions of similar symptoms. Chapter 1 is probably the worst, but if things like that trigger you, please beware.

The meatloaf is the greatest thing Steve's tasted in ages. He's eaten about a half of his slice by now and he still finds it hard to take his eyes off the plate. He swallows the bit he's been chewing and stabs another morsel with his fork, and then –

He frowns.

There's an unidentified object that doesn't belong on his perfect slice of meatloaf, and Steve squints at it, trying to discern its origin.

Oh. Right.

Steve glances at Mrs. Henderson; she isn't looking at him. He discretely removes the cat hair from his plate and throws it to the side of his chair.

Satisfied, he reverts his attention back to the food, but out of the corner of his eye, he realizes that Dustin is giving him a look.

It's a look that Steve recognizes well. He gave it often himself, back in the day of high school glory, but hasn't been on the receiving end many times before. Before he started hanging out with the kids, that is.

It's the 'stop being so uncool' look.

How is this his life.

Steve gives Dustin a small glare.

"This is a really great meatloaf, Mrs. Henderson," he says honestly.

"Thank you, Stevie," she says, beaming. "It's Dusty's favorite. The trick is in the seasoning. I can write down the recipe if your mother wants to—"

But her voice is cut by a loud bang from the living room.

Steve jumps from his chair, toppling it over. His eyes fixate on the direction of the noise. His hands grab the knife and fork and his heart starts thundering, fear rising from somewhere in the bottom of his spine up to his neck. He can hear Dustin's terrified breathing next to him and he wonders briefly whether he could call Chief Hopper or should they just run – but shit there probably isn't enough time for them to even get to the car, but maybe Dustin and Mrs. Henderson can if Steve keeps the monsters busy –

Before anyone could say anything, Mrs. Henderson gets up and leaves in the direction of the noise.

"Mom, wait –" Dustin begins, but she's already disappeared through the door, and Steve braces himself for the sounds –

There's a gasp.

"Tews! Bad kitty!"

Steve holds his breath and doesn't move.

"Did you knock over the lamp again? We've talked about this," Mrs. Henderson says in pretend-strict tones. After a few moments, she

returns to the dining room, alive and unscathed with the Siamese nestled innocently in her arms, a vaguely mischievous look on its face.

"It was just the light bulb," she says, smiling reassuringly. "What am I going to do with you?" she coos, waving a finger in front of the cat's face. Tews grabs at it playfully.

It was the stupid cat...

Steve closes his eyes and exhales. He picks up his chair and sits back down. He can barely feel his legs. The knife and fork drop from his shaking hand and he clenches and unclenches his fingers; they seem to have stopped working.

Mrs. Henderson sits, all of her attention on the cat, and Steve gives Dustin a sideways glance. The kid looks back and takes a deep, quiet breath, shaking his head slowly with mutual, weary relief.

Only Steve's heart won't stop ramming against his chest, and his hands are shaking, and his fingers are going numb.

There should be relief, but he doesn't feel it.

"Could you excuse me for a minute?" he mutters.

Not waiting for a response, he gets up and leaves the dining room.

He has no idea where he's going and his heart is pounding faster and faster but if he can just have a minute of peace and quiet somewhere alone, it'll be fine. It'll have to be fine.

Somehow he stumbles into Dustin's room. The chaos hitting his eyes makes him stop for a second – *there's too much stuff, why is there so much stuff here* – then he goes to the window and leans his hands against the wall.

He closes his eyes and tries to breathe.

It was the cat. It was just the cat. Everything's fine.

But there's a misplaced horror around his chest that doesn't want to

listen to reason. It's constricting his entire body and there's ice in his throat and around his mind and the breathing isn't working no matter how hard he tries. The air feels like shards of glass in his throat and there isn't enough space in his lungs for the little he manages to inhale and he wonders if he's having a heart attack because it *hurts*, and the ringing in his ears is drowning out the silence of the room and even if something *does* happen now he won't be able to hear it, a monster will come up to him and he'll have no idea until it attacks –

this is not happening to me, this is not a part of my life

– but apparently this is his life now, along with the nightmares and the nail-studded bat under his bed, and the ringing that's growing and growing as if it's about to swallow him up.

"Steve?"

The hesitant word breaks through the noise and a part of Steve screams *PROTECT* and another part says *there's no danger you idiot, it's all in your head*, but the thought rushes away before he can focus, the world shimmers around the edges and the kid is going to freak out and all Steve can do is try to breathe and *fail*. Dustin says nothing else, or perhaps Steve has gone deaf, the ringing is too loud and beyond that there's nothing and behind him Dustin is worried and Steve knows he can't deal with this anymore –

"Which Lord of the Rings characters would you say we are?"

Through the panic, Steve is sure he hasn't heard well. "*What?*" he manages.

"We-we were just talking about it the other day, the guys I mean," Dustin says tentatively. "We can't come to an agreement, but maybe you can help. I think my idea's the best, but you can judge for yourself."

Steve can barely discern the words from the sound of his own breathing and the noise in his mind but *what the hell is this kid talking about* –

"It's like this," Dustin begins. "Mike and Lucas have always been

fighting about which one of them is Aragorn, and now Mike says he's Aragorn because he wants El to be Arwen, which is just gross. I mean it sort of fits since Chief Hopper doesn't let her see Mike, but seriously, she needs a character with a bigger role, Arwen isn't even *in* the books. Me, I'm Gimli, 'cause I was a dwarf in a lot of our campaigns so I already know a lot of dwarf stuff. Then Lucas can be Legolas because he has his wrist rocket and that's a bit like a bow and arrows. Will's the wizard, so he's Gandalf. It all fits."

It all fits, Steve's mind repeats absurdly, and he has no idea how Dustin isn't freaking out because he feels and sounds like he's dying.

"But now, there's you guys, and we don't know where to fit you, and that's a problem."

What a problem, Steve thinks, it's the worst problem he's ever heard of, he has no idea how the world keeps turning –

"So I had this idea," Dustin continues. "If we're going to fit you all in, let's say – just for the sake of being realistic – that Mike, Will, Lucas and me are hobbits. That's great because the rest of you can be other characters, but it brings us to a whole other set of problems," he says. His voice gets steady and strong and Steve latches onto the only sound that makes sense.

"Here's my theory. First of all, Will is Frodo. I mean, come on. The Ringwraiths and Sauron and the ring that takes him to a different realm? The Upside Down and the Mind Flayer? *Hello?* Then obviously, Mike would be Sam, 'cause he was really there for Will when Will was going through all that shit. Now, Mike hates this, because he's stupid – Sam's like the coolest character, he's brave and loyal and the best friend ever, there's no way Frodo would ever survive without him. So that leaves Pippin and Merry for Lucas and me. I'd say I'm Merry, because out of Lucas and me, I'm much more knowledgeable, and a bit more mature than him. Not very, okay, but a bit – oh who am I kidding, I'm *way* more mature than him, if he's Pippin then I'm like, Elrond level mature – oo, Elrond."

A pensive pause.

Then, "Nah, too much responsibility. Anyway, as I was saying, Lucas

is Pippin, and I don't see why he has to complain about it too. Pippin's brave, he is curious, he becomes a Guard of the Citadel *and* he gets a cool sword. Why would anyone *not* want to be him, is what I'd like to know."

Though he still has no idea what Dustin's talking about, Steve hears him a bit better now. It doesn't feel like a heart attack as much anymore, just a rough out-of-breathness as if he's been running too hard.

"But I don't know if it'll work because as I said, Mike doesn't want to be Sam, and... Come to think of it, Will didn't seem too happy about being Frodo either. Hm."

The breaths feel slower and longer, and the ever-consuming horror has dwindled into a low, cold haze in the back of his mind.

Dustin keeps talking.

"But they're just stupid, it's such a great idea because that way we can fit the rest of you in, and it's so easy. Like Chief Hopper's Gandalf, 'cause he smokes and grumbles a lot. You're Aragorn, 'cause you're awesome, you're our leader and you protect us from danger. And also you're King Steve and Aragorn got to be king in the end. It's a perfect fit."

One thing registers this time, and it's the fact that Dustin thinks he's like a king from some stupid book.

"It's a bit harder for the girls, 'cause there aren't any girls in the Fellowship. They could be like additional hobbits, but I also want to give them real characters 'cause they're so badass. So let's see. Max, she's obviously Eowyn, there's no question about it. She's tough and she doesn't take any shit, remember how she threatened Billy with the bat? Shit, no, you were unconscious. But she did and it was awesome. So Max is Eowyn. I'm not so sure about Eleven. I suggested Galadriel, Mike hated this too, but just hear me out – Galadriel has all these superpowers, she's like the most powerful of the Elves, she even has one of the rings. And the gifts she gave everyone kind of saved them. And El saves us? It's a bit of a stretch, I know, but... What do you think, Steve?"

Steve takes a deep breath, and miraculously, the air behaves as it's supposed to. He swallows and exhales.

"Dustin, I have no idea what you're talking about," he says shakily.

He hears a gasp behind him.

"You mean you haven't read Lord of the Rings? Oh dude, you gotta, it's the best book ever. You can borrow mine if you want."

Wondering how he could kindly phrase that he couldn't care less about Lord of the Rings, Steve slowly turns around. But suddenly there's another reason he can't breathe, and it's because there's a warm Dustin around his chest.

Steve's arms shoot up, and then, realizing what's happening, he brings them down awkwardly around Dustin's shoulders.

"It's over, okay?" Dustin says, his voice muffled and gentle. "Don't lose your shit. El closed the gate. It's over."

"Yeah," Steve says through the lump in his throat. "Yeah, I know."

It's bullshit, though. How can it ever be over when there are monsters lurking on the other side of reality just waiting for a chance to break through?

But if Steve could choose only one of them to believe it's over, he'd choose Dustin. So he just repeats, "It's over."

Dustin nods. He shows no intention of moving. Steve doesn't either, because as uncomfortable as the situation is he just can't bring himself to do it.

They stay like that for a while.

After an eternity Dustin disentangles himself, gives Steve a small smile and sits on the bed.

Steve sits next to him, his arms on his thighs, and looks at the floor.

"Does this King Aragon ever lose his shit?" he mutters.

"It's *Aragorn*. And no, he doesn't. You'll have to step it up," Dustin says, grinning.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Here, you can borrow my books. You'll see, he's the best. I mean, they all are, but Aragorn is seriously the awesomest character ever. This is the first volume," Dustin says, taking from the shelf the thickest book Steve has seen in his life, "and when you finish it let me know and I'll give you the next one. But no, you know what, it's even better if you read *this one* first," he says, taking a marginally smaller book and putting it on top of the first one.

The Hobbit, it says.

"You can have Lord of the Rings too, but trust me, you gotta read *The Hobbit* first," Dustin says. His face lights up. "*Or*, maybe, if you want, you can read them at the same time, that way you'll –"

"Hey man, thanks," Steve interrupts, "but it's fine, I'm... not really into reading, so... if I take your books they're just gonna lie around my house and collect dust. But thanks anyway."

"Oh. Okay."

Dustin puts the books away. His face is blank, but Steve has an annoying feeling he has slightly let him down.

"My idea's still the best, though," he says.

"Yeah, I mean, definitely," Steve replies.

A silence stretches between them.

"Hey, Steve?" Dustin asks quietly. "If you ever do lose your shit again, like when you're home or whatever, call me. Whenever you want. Like literally whenever. My mom's a heavy sleeper so don't worry about that, and the phone's close to my room, there's no chance I'll miss it. Okay?"

Steve stares at the floor.

"... Yeah, sure. Thanks," he says, because he has no idea what else is there to do. He knows he'll never do it and yet the offer – *order* – itself is the nicest thing he's ever heard.

Dustin nods, smiling.

"Wanna get back? There's chocolate cake after the meatloaf."

"Yeah, that sounds great," Steve says, forcing a smile. "Hey, I'm just gonna run to the bathroom real quick, okay? Tell your mom I'll be there in a second."

"Okay."

Steve gets up and walks towards the door.

"Oh and Steve?"

He stops, his hand at the doorknob. "Yeah?"

"Don't worry about Aragorn not losing his shit. You're way more awesome than him anyway."

Steve blinks. He looks back at Dustin, who's gazing at him in that stupid loving childlike way, and he opens his mouth to say something, but then he changes his mind. He leaves for the bathroom.

At that moment, he's glad he doesn't know anything about Aragorn.

Claudia doesn't really know the tall teenager with the funny hair who sometimes has dinner at her house. But she knows that she loves him, because Dusty loves him. So she takes a big bag and packs him half the chocolate cake, which turned out pretty good if she may say so herself, the entire leftover meatloaf, an unopened carton of orange juice and some apples and bananas.

Just in case he feels like snacking later.

This is how it ends, Steve thinks, as the monsters charge towards them.

His life doesn't flash before his eyes. There is only:

I am eighteen.

They aren't really thoughts, more like snippets of awareness whirling in his head with the stony certainty that these are the last moments of his life.

They have a strange clarity Steve never knew before.

I am eighteen and this is how it ends

and I am fine.

He knows he's done everything he could, and if he's failed, it's not his fault. The monsters are just too damn quick.

Steve has done everything he could.

So he stands there, his bat raised in front of Dustin, the demons from hell itself rushing towards them and he *knows* he's doing everything he can and no it's not enough but it's *okay*.

It's okay.

In the nightmares, it's always different.

Waking up feels like the first breath of air after drowning. Sharp, alive, and never enough. The darkness of the tunnels fades to the innocent moonlit night of his room.

Steve turns on the lamp next to his bed blindly, then lies back, ripples of fear still vibrating beneath his skin. He presses his back and shoulders into the pillow, glancing at every corner of the room. The shadows look normal and no monsters from the dream seem to have followed him, so he closes his eyes and sighs.

This fucking sucks.

He lies there and breathes, one hand over his heart.

It's the same thing every time. Tunnels, terror, death, and the relentless guilt that extends into reality. The nightmares have all but replaced the feelings from his memories, and Steve doesn't remember being fine as vividly as he knows he should have been faster, stronger, smarter.

And that's the one thing that lies heavier than the crushing fear that takes over his lungs sometimes and makes him feel like he's dying: the thought that if the monsters hadn't been called away, the kids would all be dead, and it'd be his fault.

But they're not dead. They're alive. They're fine. Everything's okay so just fucking stop –

Except that nothing is okay.

And one day it'll happen again. The gate might be closed, but those things are still out there, trying to find a way to rip a hole into this world.

They might do it right here in this house.

Right now.

Steve forces himself to take a deep breath.

It'd be so nice to be able to run away from his own mind for a bit.

He roughly pulls the covers away, then goes to open the window. The chilly air feels like knives on his sweaty face, and the outside seems to hide dangers he'd rather not face, so he closes it soon. He exits his room and descends the stairs, trying not to think about the darkness of the forest around his huge, empty house, if it's truly empty at all –

Don't go there.

As he passes through the hallway, Steve glances at the phone. For several brief seconds, he almost hesitates.

Damn it. Not in a million years.

He continues to the bathroom. The scalding hot shower manages to convince him that it's safe, and walking back through the hallway is a tiny bit easier, even though somewhere on the other side the house is not empty, but filled with darkness and evil and something *watching* –

Steve takes another deep breath, then goes to the kitchen.

The bag full of food Mrs. Henderson made him take is sitting on the counter. He opens it mechanically, and after putting the cake, the juice and the meatloaf in the fridge and the fruit on the table, he picks up the bag to throw it away.

But there's something else inside. Steve reaches in and pulls out a mysterious flat object, wrapped carefully in a small separate bag. He takes it off.

He frowns for a moment. Then he smiles.

The little shithead.

He goes to the living room and turns the light on, barely taking his eyes off the green cover depicting a wizard and something that looks like a hill with a door. He plops down on the couch, one arm behind his head, and positions the book against his legs.

It's probably stupid, but it's worth a shot.

He opens it.

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.

Notes for the Chapter:

The last line is the opening line from *The Hobbit*, and the title of the fic is a reference as well.

This was originally meant to be a one shot, but then I started planning a short epilogue, and now the epilogue has become chapter 2 and there is also

chapter 3, only I've no idea when I'll have time to write them. Fortunately it works as a standalone too.

Thank you for reading :) Comments and kudos are so welcome!

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

This was originally a five-hundred-words epilogue, and then it somehow grew to six times its size and turned into this, so... I hope you enjoy the completely unintended chapter 2 :)

Steve closes the book.

He stares at the back cover for a while.

Then he heaves a great sigh.

Okay.

Now what?

Now get up and actually do something, his brain says. Steve stretches on the couch and closes his eyes, feeling a stupid mix of happy and sad.

It's been several days since he's been desperate enough to try reading as a form of self-therapy. Completely assured he was just wasting his time – but hey, *The Hobbit* might at least be boring enough to make him fall asleep – he began reading the book that Dustin had sneaked into his mom's bag of food. It was going to be some crap about dungeons and dragons, Steve thought, and it'd be a success if he made it past page one.

He was shocked to discover that this kind of therapy actually worked. Sort of. You can't really have nightmares if you're not even sleeping due to the fact that you can't put the stupid book down. He lies on the living room couch and doesn't notice the hours gliding past until the first rays of sun shine in through the window, or until he wakes up groggy and disoriented from an uncomfortable sleep, mercifully free of any dreams except for those vaguely filled with beards.

Sometimes Steve wonders if this is what the kids do, just run away into imagined worlds when things get too difficult to handle, and if

that's the reason they all seem to be coping so well. Well, if it is, it doesn't sound half bad. He could do that, he thinks. He's always been good at running away.

Other times, though, he can't help but wonder how healthy it actually is. It'd be great to find out if people his age and above do it, but then he realizes he has no one to ask. One time he tries to imagine his dad settling down with a cigar and *The Hobbit* after a bad day at work, but in addition to making him laugh, the image feels faintly disturbing, so he abandons all similar thought and returns to the story. It's a good thing his parents aren't home, because seeing their son on the couch with his hands glued to a nerdy book would probably be just as disturbing.

He's in luck, though, since they're away so often. Come to think of it, he's probably been spending more time with Mrs. Henderson than his own mom lately... which feels a bit weird, and also somehow okay.

Because Steve loves his mom. She's his mom. She's warm childhood memories and lectures about his grades, expensive dinner parties and complaining about his dad, immaculate dresses and the scent of hairspray that they share. She's many things.

Steve and his mom haven't been close for a long time. He isn't sure whose fault is it more: his, hers, or his dad's.

Mrs. Henderson is warm memories right now, hugs every time he arrives and even bigger ones when he leaves, bags of enough food to last him a week being shoved into his arms and the invitation to come to dinner whenever he wants.

Steve loves his mom. He'd do anything for her.

He'd do anything for Mrs. Henderson, too.

So when she calls him that morning asking if he'd be free to help Dustin clean out the garage for the yard sale (which she'd pay him for, of course), he immediately says yes (he'd say no to the money later) and grabs the keys to his car, banishing the fuzziness of four hours of sleep from his mind. Because really, who cares about sleep. The important thing is that he managed to finish the book before she

called.

He drives to the Wheelers place first, because where else would Dustin be on Saturday morning. Mrs. Wheeler lets him in and returns to the kitchen, and Steve waits alone in front of the basement, drumming his fingers on a table with sudden nervousness. He hasn't talked to Dustin since having a breakdown at his house, and knowing the kid, he probably isn't going to do the nice thing and pretend it never happened.

Soon, Dustin climbs up the stairs. Steve braces himself.

"So?" Dustin says by way of greeting.

"So what?"

"Did you read it?" Dustin clarifies, almost bouncing on his heels.

Steve exhales inwardly. The book was another thing altogether.

"I didn't *read* it, okay?" he says, attempting nonchalance. "I... I skimmed through."

"You *skimmed through*?" Dustin repeats in dismay.

Steve nods. For several moments Dustin seems too horror-struck to speak, then he lights up again.

"So, what did you think about Murgatroyd the Brown?"

"What? There's no character called *Murgatroyd*, what are you –"

The familiar grin makes Steve realize he's just made a grave mistake.

"You read it," Dustin says, quietly gleeful. "I knew it." He turns in the direction of the basement and cups a hand around his mouth.

"HEY GUYS! STEVE LOVED THE HOBBIT!"

Steve leans against the wall and groans, covering his face with his hands. The kids thunder up the stairs like a herd of elephants, delight bouncing off the walls, and gather around him talking all at the same

time:

"Really, Steve?"

"That's so great!"

"Who's your favorite character? Mine used to be Thorin, now I'm more of a Balin sort of guy."

"Did you like Gandalf, Steve? He's so cool, he always gets everyone out of trouble –"

"What did you think about Smaug? The way he obliterates half the town, like *whoosh* –"

"What about Gollum, Steve? Did you know he's also a hobbit?"

"Shhh, don't spoil it for him, he hasn't read Lord of the Rings yet –"

"Alright, alright, alright!" Steve shouts, throwing his hands up in front of him. He glances at his watch. "Uh, Dustin, we have to go, we're gonna be late, your mom said to be there by one, so let's just..." He makes a shooing motion towards the door.

There they are. Those looks again.

Feeling like a lame grown-up, and annoyed with himself for feeling like a lame grown-up, Steve ushers Dustin from the house, a chorus of "Bye, Steve!" following him out.

The Henderson garage is full of endless kinds of shit, and as he takes in the piles upon piles upon piles of boxes, Steve distinctly regrets agreeing to do this.

And then he notices the cookies and lemonade Mrs. Henderson has laid out.

He sighs and reaches for a box from the top, and the two of them start working.

They were originally meant to sort the things into 'keep,' 'sell' and 'throw away' piles, but this system quickly deteriorates. Steve soon realizes the most difficult job would be to Dustin focused on the task at hand, as the kid keeps finding old books and toys that make him temporarily deaf to his surroundings. Explaining the item's history to Steve while bubbling with excitement is apparently the highlight of the process.

After some discussion during which Steve is made to feel like a lame grown-up again, they settle into going through the boxes in a kind of slow, lazy rhythm, punctuated by occasional breaks for refreshments that Mrs. Henderson regularly supplies.

She and Dustin beam at each other every time she appears, and after a while, Steve stops finding this completely bizarre. He has no idea how they manage to be so close. Maybe it's because it's just the two of them, he thinks. Or maybe it's an age thing. Maybe, in a few years, Dustin and his mom won't be so close either. The thought makes strangely sad.

And also, somehow, doesn't seem likely at all.

Having exchanged the empty tray for a full one, Mrs. Henderson goes back inside, and after another cookie break, they continue working.

"So, how are you?" Dustin asks after a while. He's going through a box of old clothes and isn't looking at Steve, but his tone is that careful mix of casual and neutral that Steve has been dreading. He shrugs.

"I'm fine."

Dustin snorts, flinging an old sweater at the 'throw away' pile.

"Seriously. How are you?"

"I'm... fine enough," Steve says.

There's no reply.

And that's it, Steve thinks hopefully. He's done the polite thing and asked, now we don't have to talk about it anymore.

"Has it... happened again?" Dustin asks.

Damn it.

"Have any more of your pets almost killed me, you mean?" Steve jokes, aiming to steer the conversation into lighter waters. "No, not recently."

Dustin scoffs.

"Dart did not almost kill you. Those were the other Demodogs. I'm pretty sure he'd never have killed you."

"Yeah, no. I mean, Tews is the one to watch out for, with those tiny claws and baby teeth."

"Hey, don't get between her and the food bowl, that's all I'm saying," Dustin replies, grinning. "And don't stand near a lamp," he adds seriously. "She hates lamps."

Steve chuckles. "Got it." He discretely pushes a box full of books towards Dustin's part of the garage.

This is fine. This is great. Just talking about nothing, just chatting, joking around, now let's look at the pretty books –

"I meant the other thing," Dustin continues. He seems uncomfortable. He draws the books closer, but to Steve's disappointment, there's no reaction whatsoever. "The... freaking out thing."

Steve's stomach flips. He continues going through a box of kitchen appliances mechanically.

"Hasn't happened," he says. But he knows he paused too long before answering.

"And now you're just lying to me," Dustin says. He goes through the books with suspicious uninterest, almost like he's just pretending. Like this conversation is all he cares about.

"I'm not lying to you," Steve mumbles.

"Yeah, right. What the hell, dude? I told you to call me."

"And what'd that accomplish?"

Dustin hauls the entire box of books towards the 'keep' pile and shrugs.

"You'd feel better."

"No, I'd feel worse, knowing that I burdened you with my problems –"

"You can't know that's how you'd feel until you do it, which you really *should* –"

"Shit, man, I don't know what the hell you expect me to do," Steve says, throwing a broken toaster onto the pile of clothes. "Wake you up in the middle of the night to cry about how scary it is? There's no _"

"Is that what this is about?" Dustin interrupts, scoffing. "You're *embarrassed*?"

"No, that's not – there's just – there's no point," he says. He stops going through the box and takes a deep breath. "There's no point, okay? And it's so stupid. Barbara Holland died, and Bob Newby and all those other people, Will got possessed, I got out of it without a scratch except for what that maniac did and I'm not supposed to be freaking out. It's..." He sighs. "It's just stupid."

There's no sound of objects being moved. Steve stares at his box, not really seeing it, not daring to look at Dustin.

"I can't sleep without the lights on," Dustin says after a while. "Is that stupid?"

Steve shakes his head. "That's different. You're a kid."

"So are you."

"I'm not. I'm eighteen, a mature adult –"

"Yeah, tell that to your brain."

"Hey, shut up."

"Do you want me to call you first? Will that make it less embarrassing for you?"

"Shit, don't –" Steve turns towards him and looks him in the eyes. "Don't do that," he orders. "Understand? Don't even *think* about doing that."

Dustin gives him a strange look, then turns around. He starts going through a box with unusual force.

He's pissed. Well, tough, Steve thinks, in spite of the rising guilt. He returns to his box.

"So then, what are you going to do about it?" Dustin asks, and the anger mixed with something else in his voice makes Steve flinch. He can't remember hearing him like this before.

"Just... wait until it stops, I guess," he says.

"Oh, that must be the mature adult speaking," Dustin says maliciously. "I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you –"

"Look, that's enough, okay?" Steve says. "Like it or not, I *am* older than you, which means I'm not going to talk to you about this shit –"

Dustin turns around and throws a toy truck on the ground.

"Yeah, and who else are you gonna talk to, Steve?" he yells. "Your *parents*? Your *school counselor*? We are the only ones who know what happened, and we gotta talk about it so we don't go crazy!"

There is silence.

Steve stands there, caught between two breaths, unable to do anything but stare at Dustin as a terrible thought occurs:

Maybe Dustin needs to talk about it as much as he's trying to get Steve to do it.

Maybe more.

The realization makes his legs go numb.

Can he be more self-absorbed?

I am the worst person in the world, he thinks. *I am the actual worst* –

He opens his mouth, but no words come. The kid just shakes his head and turns around.

Steve feels like he can't move. Shit he sucks at comforting people, he's already lost the only girl he's ever been in love with and now he's losing this kid too, this stupid, shithead, amazing kid –

He takes a tentative step towards Dustin, who still has his back turned. From the side, Steve can see that he's holding an old, weathered-looking teddy bear, stroking it gently with the tips of his fingers.

"I'm sorry, okay?" Steve says quietly. "What I said... I didn't mean... I didn't mean that you can't call me. I just meant... I don't want you to call me just because you think that I need help. But if *you*..." He runs a hand through his hair. "Look, just call me any time, day or night. Don't think for one second that you can't, because you can, and you should. Okay?"

Dustin is still quiet. Steve is getting desperate.

"... Do you wanna talk about it?" he pleads.

"No," Dustin says irritably. Then he sighs. "Not right now. But sometimes... Maybe."

Steve takes a deep breath. Slowly, he returns to his box, barely registering what he's doing. The relief makes his hands shake.

"What has all of this been like for you?" he asks. He can't believe he's never asked before. "Do you ever... freak out?"

There's a small pause.

"It's mostly just... the lights thing," Dustin says, looking at the teddy bear. "I can't fall asleep in the dark. And... sometimes I have bad

dreams. And like... Sometimes I start thinking about what happened, and I can't stop. It's like it's always in my head. And even if I forget about it for a minute it always comes back. Then it stops for like no reason and it doesn't even cross my mind for days. And then I remember and it's in my head all over again. It's weird."

"And what do you do when it's like that?" he asks. He tries very hard to just sound concerned and not as if he's fishing for suggestions.

Dustin shrugs. "Read, mostly. Play with Tews. Hang out with my mom. She doesn't know anything, but she just has this thing, like, she makes you feel better just by being there. Or I hang out with the guys, that kind of stuff."

Steve nods.

"Right."

Well, he thinks, he has no books, pets or friends, and hanging out with his mom seems like a brilliant recipe for feeling even worse. He sighs inwardly.

"You and the guys talk about what happened?"

"Not really," Dustin says. "Will doesn't want to. Everyone else is making him talk about it and he's so sick of it, which I totally understand. Mike doesn't want to because of Will, and if Will's not there he just goes on about El anyway. I talked with Lucas a bit, but ultimately I think he just wants to forget about it. But like, how can we ever forget about this? *How?*"

At that moment, Steve realizes something else:

Despite not being lonely, Dustin Henderson doesn't really have anyone to talk to either.

And Steve wants to say something important so bad. He wants to lie, make a joke, give advice or some comforting garbage that will be meaningful and make it all better, that will make the kid forget that they've almost died and let him have at least some peace of mind in the chaos of the memories haunting every moment of his life. He wants to say anything other than what he says.

But he can't.

"I don't know."

Dustin looks at him. Steve holds the gaze.

There's nothing else to say.

After a few seconds, Dustin reverts to the box of toys and starts sorting through them.

Steve stands there for a while, then he picks up another box from the top and continues with the work.

The atmosphere quietly settles.

"Seriously though, what did you think of *The Hobbit*?" Dustin asks after a few minutes.

The most awesome thing I've ever –

"It was... Not bad. It was okay."

Dustin looks impressed.

"High praise from King Steve," he teases, but there's no malice in it this time, and it's great. "You do know that's an actual book you read, right, not just like, the back of a Farrah Fawcett spray –"

"Shut up. It was surprisingly okay, actually. I thought it'd be really boring, but it wasn't."

"Who's your favorite character?"

Steve scoffs.

"Are you kidding me? Bilbo."

"Bilbo?" Dustin asks, smiling.

"Of course. Come on, the dude's just minding his own business, eating all this great food, drinking beer, smoking his pipe... And a bunch of dwarves barge into his house and drag him away on some stupid life-

threatening adventure. You gotta feel for the guy."

Dustin laughs. "He did get something out of it, though."

"Yeah, a shitload of gold he didn't need, and probably a lifetime of nightmares about that dragon."

"No, I mean... he made all these friends, and they're friends forever. They'll always be there for him. That's kind of cool, right?"

Steve thinks about this.

"Yeah... that's kind of cool."

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for reading, I would love to hear your impressions <3